

QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (12/01/05)

1. How many processing facilities have switched to the Quality Assurance Program (QAP)?

At this point, only Minute Maid in Auburndale. Silver Springs in Groveland is in the process of switching to QAP. Most of the other plants in the State have expressed an interest in converting to QAP sometime in 2006.

2. What additional duties will Agricultural Commodity Graders (ACG's) be required to perform at a QAP plant?

Many of the duties ACG's are currently performing will be similar to those expected of employees working in a QAP facility. However, you will be expected to institute QAP verification at the facility. ACG's will be trained on those specifics.

3. If only GS-9's can be in charge of a QAP plant, who will relieve assigned GS-9's for annual or sick leave?

It will be similar to how it currently works in which GS-7's fill in on a temporary basis when GS-9's are absent. It is also possible that we will have extra GS-9's who may be called upon to fill in for periods of time.

4. Will GS-7's be trained for QAP?

If he/she is relieving a GS-9 at a QAP facility, the GS-7 will receive just-in-time training. We do plan on conducting a QAP training session soon, but the initial session will, most likely, be limited to GS-9's.

5. Will more GS-9 positions be made available?

At this point, there does not appear to be a need to create more GS-9 positions.

6. If a plant elects QAP and after a year decides to discontinue, can that GS-9 bump someone else in the area?

Possibly. Please keep in mind that the competitive area for a RIF is the entire State; it is not limited to a specific plant or local commuting area.

7. What was decided about the Florida Quality Systems Certification (FQSC) program by the State of Florida's Department of Citrus (DOC)?

The DOC adopted FQSC as a viable program on November 16, 2005. There have been a couple plants that have expressed an interest in FQSC so far. There are many details that still need to be worked out prior to the implementation of FQSC in a citrus facility.

8. When will early retirements be offered under Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA)?

Those who are eligible for voluntary early retirements should have already received letters informing them of their eligibility. The letter states that the deadline by which to make a decision is January 6, 2006, with the effective date of the voluntary early retirement being no later than February 3, 2006.

9. Will VERA be offered throughout the RIF process?

No. There may be another offering after the initial offering (see Question #8), but that has not been determined as of yet.

10. What is the benefit to VERA?

It provides those who are otherwise ineligible to retire voluntarily the opportunity to take a voluntary early retirement. It is a matter of personal choice. A discontinued service retirement, on the other hand, is an involuntary retirement (see Question #11).

11. If I am eligible for VERA, but decline to exercise that option will I be given another opportunity to retire if later I am one of the employees impacted by a RIF?

If you are eligible for VERA, you are also eligible for discontinued service retirement. Should you receive a RIF separation notice, you will be given the opportunity to take a discontinued service retirement. Similar to VERA, discontinued service retirement allows an employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or an employee with 25 years of service to retire, albeit involuntarily.

12. Could the Processed Products Branch (PPB) obtain a waiver of the VERA age and length of service requirements?

The early requirement criteria are established by regulation and cannot be waived. VERA allows an employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or an employee at any age with 25 years of service to voluntarily retire.

13. Can the 2% reduction for every year under 55 be waived for those electing early retirement or discontinued service retirement?

No. This reduction applies to employees in CSRS and CSRS Offset. The reduction cannot be waived for these employees as it is governed and required by Federal law (5 USC 8336(d) and 5 CFR 831.108). FERS employees do not have an age reduction under VERA.

14. Is this reduction to CSRS and CSRS Offset retirement annuities for either a voluntary early retirement or a discontinued service retirement a strict 2% per year?

The annuity rate is reduced by one-sixth of one percent for each full month the retiring employee is under age 55. This equates to a 2% reduction for every year that such an employee is under age 55.

15. Do you have to be involuntarily separated to collect severance pay?

Yes.

16. Will I receive severance pay if I am eligible to retire (either voluntarily or involuntarily)?

No.

17. How can I determine how much severance pay I will receive if I am: (1) eligible to receive it; (2) not offered a continuing position elsewhere within the State; and (3) separated from the rolls?

OPM publication, "The Employee's Guide to Reduction in Force Benefits," discusses benefits for those in a RIF. This publication, which also has a severance pay estimation worksheet, can be found on the following web site: <http://opm.gov/rif/general/egrifben.asp>.

18. Will mixed-tour employees receive severance pay in a RIF?

Government personnel regulations state that any appointment that includes an intermittent work schedule (even if it also includes a part-time and/or a full-time work schedule) is considered to be a non-qualifying appointment for the purpose of severance pay. This means that employees on mixed-tours of duty who are reached for separation in a RIF are not eligible for severance pay.

19. What is the time period between the RIF notice and the separation date?

Regulation requires that an employee be provided a minimum of 60 days advance notice prior to separation.

20. Would I continue to work after receiving a RIF notice?

Yes.

21. Were the performance standards changed with this RIF in mind?

No. In conjunction with the President's Management Agenda, the USDA mandated that all Agencies, including AMS, ensure that all of our performance plans are results-oriented and in alignment with Agency and Departmental strategic plans.

22. Will I receive a Certificate of Expected Separation?

A certificate of expected separation does not apply to this situation since the entire workforce is not subject to a RIF (i.e., not everyone assigned to the Winter Haven Area Office will be RIF'd.).

23. Who is subject to geographic mobility?

AMS Directive 327.1, Geographic Mobility Requirements, dated September 16, 1994, states AMS' policy on geographic mobility as a condition of employment in specified positions. Effective December 13, 1985, all Fruit and Vegetable Programs ACG's were subject to this requirement whether or not individual employees signed a mobility agreement. For further information, please look at AMS Directive 327.1 on the following web site: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/issuances/toc.htm>.

24. Are there any exceptions to geographic mobility other than those mentioned above?

No. If you are subject to geographic mobility, you are contractually obligated to accept another assignment outside of your local commuting area. Failure to accept the reassignment will result in your separation from the Service and you will not be eligible for severance pay or discontinued service retirement.

25. Will employees get to see the retention register?

Yes. Once it is completed, individual employees will be able to see it except that performance ratings will not be shown since performance data is not public information.

26. Will the retention register continue to be updated?

Yes. Personnel regulations require that they are kept updated throughout the RIF process.

27. If plants go to QAP and/or FQSC at different times, how will the RIF be accomplished?

There may be a need for multiple RIF's. This could mean that an employee is offered a continuing position in another part of the State during an initial RIF, but the same employee could be separated from the rolls in an ensuing RIF.

28. How long must a continuing position last if I am offered another position somewhere within the State of Florida?

At least 3 months per 5 CFR 351.701(a).

29. If I receive a RIF notice does that mean I will be automatically separated from the rolls?

No. A RIF notice could list a date of separation. Alternatively, a RIF notice could include the offer of a continuing position in another part of the State.

30. If I receive an offer of a continuing position in another part of the State in a RIF notice, how long will I have to decide whether to take that position?

A minimum of two weeks.

31. When am I eligible for Agency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ACTAP)?

Upon the receipt of a RIF notice. ICTAP eligibility also begins upon receipt of a RIF separation notice.

32. If I moved would my CTAP eligibility transfer with me?

CTAP eligibility is only within the local commuting area of the location at which the RIF occurred. It is based on the duty station from which an employee is separated (e.g., CTAP would not transfer out-of-Florida if an individual moved to another State).

33. How long does ICTAP eligibility last?

ICTAP eligibility concludes 1 (one) year from the date of separation.

34. Can an excepted service temporary employee limited to 1039 hours per service year go on a Temporary Duty Assignment (TDA)?

It's possible, but not likely.

35. Are you converting any excepted service personnel to competitive service (mixed-tour)?

No.

36. If GS-9's need to be RIF'd, could a GS-7 with more time-in-service retain his/her job instead of a GS-9?

It is possible. However, many variables would be involved in this determination, not just time-in-service.

37. Will the employees detailed to citrus canker be recalled from their detail prior to a RIF?

There are currently 4 employees detailed to APHIS through March 30, 2006. Prior to the effective date of a RIF, they will be recalled from their detail.

38. If I don't report on a TDA, will I be charged Absent Without Leave (AWOL)?

Yes.

39. Will there still be a Plant-Assisted Continuous (PAC) program?

Yes, as long as individual plants desire this program.

40. Will those employees who are eligible to retire be required to retire?

No. Employees may choose to retire if they desire to do so, but no one will be forced to retire.

41. Could I volunteer to be RIF'd?

No. A small number of Federal agencies have the statutory authority to allow voluntary RIF separations, but the USDA is not among them.

42. Is there a web site that has information exclusively about the Winter Haven Area Office RIF?

Yes. It is http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/ppbweb/RIF/PPB_RIF.htm. This is a read-only web site; it is not interactive. However, it has a lot of useful information, including the updated web sites concerning matters pertaining to a RIF.

43. What web sites have been updated?

The USDA Career Transition Assistance Plan (Personnel Bulletin No. 330-5) has been superseded by USDA Directive 4030-330-001, dated August 5, 2005. The new web site is: <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/directives/files/dr/DR4030-330-001.pdf>. Also, the Dislocated Worker Program web site listed on the "Separation Information" hand-out from the November 1 and 3, 2005, informational meetings has changed. The new web site is: <http://www.careeronestop.org>.

44. Who should I contact for questions about non-benefits matters?

Please contact Lynn McDonald at (612) 336-3358 or Lynn.E.McDonald@aphis.usda.gov. She is a Staffing Specialist and is now the Human Resources contact in Minneapolis instead of Tracy Traxler.

45. How can I submit additional questions?

There are several options including: (1) submitting questions via your Sub-Area Supervisor; (2) contacting the Winter Haven Area Office via phone (863-294-7416) or fax (863-294-4219); (3) accessing an intranet web site titled, <http://agnis/sites/FV/PPB/FRIF/default.aspx> (this site is an interactive web site although it can only be accessed on an AMS computer); or (4) contacting Ms. McDonald or Benefits Specialist Barbara Johnson in Minneapolis.